

ERIE-NIAGARA REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP
INSTITUTE FOR LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND REGIONAL GROWTH
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Hon. Barry Weinstein, MD

Erie-Niagara Regional Partnership

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John Sheffer, II
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Tod A. Kniazuk

Strategic Planning – Draft Report

Committee: James Allen

Hon. Clyde Burmaster

Drew Cerza

Tim Doolittle

Samuel Ferraro

Maria Lehman

Hon. Peter McMahon

Hal Morse

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Dr. Gary Praetzel

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Hon. William Ross

Laura St. Pierre

John Sheffer, II

Hector Titus

Hon. Barry Weinstein, MD

Peter Wendel (facilitator)

Tod Kniazuk (administrator)

The Goal

The Erie-Niagara Regional Partnership has been serving a unique role in the community since 1998. While we have been flexible in our strategy and membership over that time, no organized planning for the group has been undertaken since its inception. That, along with the fiscal crisis in Erie County and the impending retirement of one of the founding co-chairs (Hon. Gerald Meal), led ENRP leadership to convene a strategic planning committee.

Below you will find their recommendations for moving ENRP forward in 2006 and beyond. This report should be viewed as step one in a three step process. Please review the report in preparation for step two – the September subcommittees. There we will discuss and revise the draft report in small group settings. Summaries of those discussions will be sent out to the membership as well. In step three, we will look to ratify the revised report at our October 14 general meeting.

The Organization

ENRP is an ad hoc subcommittee of the Niagara and Erie County Legislatures, in partnership with multiple levels of government and other private and non-profit agencies. Further, ENRP is a non-hierarchical collaborative network. The subcommittee recommends no change to this setup.

Draft Mission Statement

The Erie-Niagara Regional Partnership is a non-traditional regional collaborative forum for linking multiple organizations and initiatives, and also serves as a catalyst to identify and pursue opportunities to grow the region.

ENRP's Positive Core

- Non-traditional regional collaborative model of civic engagement
- Broad range of participants in a collaborative environment leading to diversity (of geography and interests)
- Demonstrated success in diverse models of engagements with specific projects
- Finding members to meet emerging issues
- A forum for addressing future issues
- Our ability to play multiple roles as a clearinghouse, advocate, forum, coordinator, incubator, project manager, implementer, catalyst, supporter, and advisor

ENRP's Successes (what we do well)

- Line of communication fostering positive relationships
- Bring politicians together with "real people"
- Expose ideas to a larger group
- Participation remains high
- No "threat" or turf wars involved, just a collaborative effort
- Provide a genuine help to agencies
- Identify needs of the area
- More than just talk
- "Doers" as opposed to "leaders" and that gets a lot more done
- Non-legislative members invest time and staff effort
- Civic engagement through non-traditional models are a common thread in successful regions – that's ENRP
- Product driven, not process driven
- Open environment; anyone can propose an idea or project
- People on committees can focus in on interest issues
- Multiple models for implementing
- Partnership with UB Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth is a reason for our success
- Clearinghouse of ideas
- Willing to take on some of the smaller initiatives

ENRP's Challenges

- Keeping continuity in the organization as members move on
- Securing permanent, reliable, and diverse funding
- Maintaining the respect and participation of the Niagara County Legislature, and fostering increased participation and interest from the Erie County Legislature
- Increasing diversity in the membership
- Keeping connected to the Erie County administration, while acknowledging that ENRP is a legislative initiative
- Securing permanent staffing
- Remaining nonpolitical and nonpartisan when tackling issues that have political overtones

Topic Areas

Currently, ENRP concentrates its efforts in the areas of economic development, government affairs, tourism and culture, and transportation. Although there are many other important areas out there (for example education, housing, or planning), the committee recommends that no changes be made to ENRP's topic areas, while reaffirming that ENRP members, county legislators and others should continue to bring forth ideas on any subject to the group.

Within the aforementioned topic areas, we act as a venue for discussing and/or acting on a wide range of projects and policies initiated by member agencies or others, and we also initiate projects and policies ourselves. The committee recommends that this model continue, and that ENRP continue to play multiple roles as a clearinghouse, advocate, forum, coordinator, incubator, project manager, implementer, catalyst, supporter, and advisor.

Process

Ideas can be brought forward by any member, county legislator, or member of the public. If first discussed at a general meeting, the idea is referred to one of the four committees by ENRP leadership. Once there, or if an idea is initiated at the subcommittee level, the subcommittee discusses the idea and brings it back to the general body for "concept approval." Essentially, the general group gives the okay for the concept to be developed into a policy or project. This too is done at the subcommittee level. The developed policy or project is then returned to the full membership for final approval. If legislative action is required, this is the time the policy or project would be forwarded to the legislatures. The committee recommends that this process be maintained, but cautions that one of the strengths of ENRP

is that it is an agile, flexible network and not an overly rigid group. So, while some degree of process is needed, it should be in support of the ideas, projects, and policies.

Membership

ENRP was originally comprised of 22 members; 10 of whom were county legislators. Over the years, we have grown to 39, although we remain at 10 legislators. This growth happened organically. As we worked on projects or policies with outside agencies, oftentimes at the completion of the task the agency was invited to join the group. A good example of this was the Buffalo Niagara Tourist Express. We worked with the NFTA, BNCVB, Niagara County Tourism, and the Niagara Falls CVB on that project. They later all became member agencies. The one area where some direction was given to the growth was in making sure that membership remain equal between Niagara and Erie County (regional entities are counted separately).

New members that were added outside of the aforementioned process tend to be recruited by ENRP leadership and administration.

The committee recommends that ENRP continue to grow organically, with no set number of members. Further, the committee recommends that membership remain equal between counties. The committee recommends that ENRP leadership develop a “wish list” of those they would like to add, then present this list to the membership to determine if any of the members could assist with the recruitment of those on the list. Finally, the committee recommends that all members of ENRP be encouraged to suggest agencies or individuals for addition to the group.

Subcommittees

As mentioned previously, ENRP does the lion’s share of its work at the subcommittee level. These subcommittees meet monthly (except prior to the first general meeting of the year, after the last general meeting of the year, and in August). Each subcommittee is chaired by a member of ENRP.

The committee recommends that the structure of the subcommittees remain in place, with one revision – all subcommittees should use agendas. All topics should be the responsibility of only one subcommittee; there should be no overlap. The committee also recommends that the four subcommittee chairs have periodic meetings as a group with ENRP leadership. This is to increase communication between the subcommittees, and to ensure that topics are not being discussed or developed in more than one subcommittee.

General Meetings

Theoretically, ENRP holds general meetings every other month, commencing in January. Practically, however, in many years the first general meeting is held in February (or later) due to the process for confirming membership and leadership that takes place annually in the legislatures. This reduces the number of meetings from six to five.

The general meetings consist of subcommittee reports in which concept approval or final approval is sought for action items and information is shared on discussions in the subcommittee, updates on important regional projects (currently power relicensing, the Framework for Regional Growth, the Buffalo Niagara Cultural Tourism Initiative, and the Regional Economic Development Strategy), an educational presentation on a topic of relevance (whether from a member agency or others), and old/new business.

The committee recommends that the structure of the general meetings remain in place, with increased opportunities for member agencies to discuss their activities. The committee did not determine how this should be done, so we leave it to the membership to determine. The committee also leaves up for discussion the frequency of general meetings, as well as the question of how we can more quickly commence with our annual schedule while respecting the legislatures' process for confirming members and leadership.

Administration

At the time of its founding, ENRP was staffed through the efforts of the clerk of the Niagara County Legislature and a majority staff member at the Erie County Legislature. Within the first year administration was fully transferred to the staffer at the Erie County Legislature due to the range of responsibilities coupled with the small number of staff at the Niagara County Legislature. In 2003 administration of ENRP was transferred to the University at Buffalo Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth. As part of this agreement, the administrator of ENRP became an employee of the Institute. As of June 2005 this is no longer the case, as funding for the position has run out (see below). The agreement with the Institute in terms of providing office space, phone and e-mail, and other support remains in place though October 14, 2005. Staffing is being provided on a voluntary basis by the administrator.

The committee recommends that the current ENRP administrator be retained and fully funded. Further, the committee recommends that the agreement between ENRP and the Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth be extended, and that the administrator be reinstated as an employee of the Institute. This will

need to be negotiated between ENRP leadership and the new director of the Institute. Leadership has requested a meeting and intends to have further information on this situation in time for discussion at the September subcommittee meetings. If for whatever reason the agreement cannot be extended, the committee recommends that administration be transferred to a member agency, with the ENRP administrator becoming an employee of that agency.

Funding

Prior to 2002, funding for ENRP administration was absorbed as part of the legislatures' staff budgets. Funding for projects also came largely from the legislatures. When administration was transferred to UB, funding came from the Erie and Niagara County Legislatures and the Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth (fringes and in-kind). The bulk of the funding came from Erie County, and so when the fiscal crisis hit that funding was lost. The committee reaffirms the responsibility of the two county legislatures to fund ENRP as it is an ad hoc subcommittee of those bodies, but also recognizes that relying solely on those bodies for funding is no longer possible.

Therefore, the committee recommends that a formula be developed whereby all member agencies are asked to contribute toward a total annual budget of \$150,000. This amount would provide full time administration (salary and fringes), meeting and incidental expenses, and seed money for projects. The committee also recommends that funding from outside sources be actively pursued for both administration and projects. Further, the committee notes that Niagara County has begun to use their grant writers to search for ENRP funding and recommends that this continue. To better facilitate the acceptance of funding (especially grant funds), the committee recommends that ENRP explore securing not for profit status as an organization.

Conclusion

Seven years into its existence, the Erie-Niagara Regional Partnership remains a vital, unique organization in the two counties. The above recommendations retain the qualities of the organization that make it a success, and build on those to achieve a refreshed and sustainable group for years to come.